

Confessing the Real Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now, and we're reading together in the first letter of John, 1 John chapter 4. We're coming back to this after a little while, and Josh has been leading us through it.

Just while you're turning to your Bibles, it is, I think, worth us marking this evening. Some of you will have seen that just this past week, one of the great missionary figures of the Western Church in the last half century or so passed away, George Verber.

However, George was an extraordinary man, quite an eccentric man, but had an incredible energy. He was the founder of OM, Operation Mobilization, began missionary work all over the world, was a great enthusiast.

I remember once coming to speak at the Christian Union at university when I was there, and he was still shaving with his electric shaver as he was walking into the room to come and give his talk. That was sort of fairly typical of George wearing his jacket with the world map all over it, and he was a great enthusiast for mobilizing for mission.

And aged 85, he's gone to be with the Lord. So the church has lost a great figure and a great character, but his legacy lives on. Our brother Imran, of course, leads the work of OM in the land of Pakistan.

[1 : 17] And I'm sure many of us have got other connections with those as well. So we give thanks to God for a great servant of his. What are we going to read now in 1 John chapter 4, and that first paragraph there, verses 1 to 6.

John says, This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

Little children, you are from God, and you have overcome them. For he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world, and therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us. Whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

And by this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Amen. May God bless his word to us and help us to understand it and to apply it to our lives.

[2 : 59] Well, do turn again in your Bibles to 1 John chapter 4 and have that in front of you so you can follow along.

And test what I'm saying. I wonder if anyone read the recent article with the headline, Royal Navy Landing Ship to Support Scottish Ferry Crisis.

An article announcing that a proper boat, a Navy ship, was going to be helping to solve the pretty dire ferry situation that was going on in Scotland.

The article was, of course, released on April the 1st, and it was a prank. And that was revealed at the very end of the article.

So for those who continued right to the bottom, they could see clearly and discern that this was clearly a prank. Of course, many wouldn't have gotten there because we live in the age of Twitter and the like, and much of what is read and consumed has been stripped down to soundbites, headlines, and there's not a great deal of thought and discernment that's often on display, is there?

[4 : 19] We can recognize, can't we, that we consume messaging all the time. Adverts, newspapers, radio, TV, YouTube, podcasts, books. There's lots and lots of messaging, some of it very simplistic, some of it very emotive, some of it layered and sophisticated.

But in the midst of all the messaging, I wonder how much discernment there is in the world. Well, John, in his letter here, is bringing into focus very sharply the need for discernment, particularly in the Christian church, and also the accompanying courage that is required to keep on the right side of reality in a world filled with ideas and differing versions of the truth.

And that is particularly necessary when those who we knew personally begin to say things that are unsettling, things that undermine our faith and cause us to ponder if we really do have all that is promised to the people of God.

That's the situation that John's writing to. There's a number have gone out from them. A number have gone out from the church, abandoning the apostles and their gospel and making promises and claims to greater things.

And of course, that's a very unsettling thing. But in our passage, John is picking up the idea that he left off at the end of chapter 3 in verse 24.

[5 : 46] John has said that those who continue in the apostolic faith, they've been given God's Holy Spirit that we might be sure about who we belong to.

But, 4 verse 1, God's Spirit isn't the only Spirit at work in the world. And so John makes it pretty clear that discernment is an important trait for the Christian.

In these verses, John is building on things he's already said earlier in the letter. Remember, we've been seeing that John's letter isn't very linear. He returns again and again to things that he's already spoken of.

And I think the way that this section of the letter works is that John spells out two realities about life in this passing dark world. And he also spells out two corresponding implications.

We've already seen the two realities. And last time we saw the first implication. But just a reminder. Reality number one, back in chapter 2, verses 15 to 27.

[6 : 59] Reality number one is that we will always have antichrists in our midst. There will always be among the visible church those who are false teachers.

That's reality number one. Reality number two, chapter 2, verses 28 to 3, 12. Reality number two, whilst it won't always be immediately obvious, there are children of God and children of the devil.

And some who belong to the evil one will masquerade as Christians. And last time we saw the corresponding implication to reality number two.

That was in chapter 3, verses 13 to 24. Because the children of Satan masquerade as the children of God, a clear implication is that many who call themselves Christians will hate the true people of God.

There is a hatred that is closer than we think. And that makes it all the more important that God's people continue to love one another. That's where we were last time.

[8 : 10] And so 2, 28 to 3, 12 is the reality that goes along with the implication in 3, 13 to 24. But what we are looking at this evening is the implication drawn from chapter 2, verses 15 to 27.

That first reality about the Antichrists being with us. And so what John is telling us is that we must test what we are taught.

Because Antichrists are with us, we must test what we are taught. That's the first thing he says, verses 1 to 3. Test what we are taught. There will always be many voices in the world that seek to persuade us of alternate versions of truth.

We must test the voices to see where their messages originate from. Look at the problem, verse 1.

John says, many false prophets have gone out. Many false prophets. Back in 2, 18, John said, Antichrist is coming.

[9 : 18] You've known that, you've been told that. And indeed, many Antichrists have come. And he says, 2, 19, they went out from us.

John's talking about the departed, those who've gone out from the apostles, those who've abandoned the church that he's writing to. And John calls them Antichrists, enemies of Jesus, who oppose him.

And now he calls them false prophets, who set up a rival Christ. And they were real dangers to this church.

Because they had Christian reputations and relationships with the church. They were claiming and offering Christian-sounding things.

But really, they were abandoning the apostles' gospel, which is the only gospel. And we must not be naive in thinking that the same thing doesn't happen today.

[10 : 22] Similar dangers exist today. Moderators, ministers, bishops. One ought to expect clear and faithful Bible teaching from them. One ought to expect faithful Bible teaching from what we buy in a Christian bookshop.

And one ought to expect clear and faithful Bible teaching from people who claim to be Bible teachers on the internet. So when they actually obscure and ignore and alter the message of the apostles, that can be deeply unsettling to the people of God, can't it?

For all intents and purposes, it looks like they should be on our side. But they're obscuring the gospel message. And the problem here isn't just the presence of the false prophets, but the proportion of them.

Look what John says. Many have gone out into the world. Not just a handful. John has assured us that darkness is passing away.

The day is set. The future is sealed. And he said that the world is passing away. The day is set. The future is sealed. But until then, until it has passed away, the true people of God will be faced with bombardments of mistruth and deception.

[11 : 46] And they'll face it from people who look like they're Christians. And who claim to be Christians. John says, Antichrists have come. And the signature and trademark of the Antichrist is deception.

He's the father of lies. And he's good at it. And he has lots of deceivers in the world. Now, John isn't writing to frighten his readers.

He's not writing to frighten us. But he is being realistic. He's preparing the Lord's people for life in this dark world. And we are best to be equipped and prepared for what is happening around us.

And what will continue to happen around us. Jesus himself said that we are to be prepared, to be alert, to be awake at the prospect of the Antichrist who are to come. Playing pretend can so often be much more comfortable, can't it?

Pretending that what is true isn't true. Closing off the thought in our minds that such dark forces are at work in the world. No, I don't want to think about that or coincidence that. But to ignore this reality is to buy what the Antichrists are selling.

[13 : 07] Well, with such a bleak and unsettling picture, what can we do? What does John say we're to do? What is the best defense against deception? How could the church John was writing to resist the allure of the departed and remain and abide and continue with the apostles?

And how can we plow a straight and faithful course today in a world filled with would-be teachers and leaders jockeying to pull us in their direction? Well, John tells us.

Look at verse 1. He says, Do not believe every spirit. Instead, test them. Why does John talk about spirit here?

Why is that his choice term? I think he talks about spirits to make clear the contrast. The true people of God, on the one hand, those who abide in the apostolic gospel, they have God's spirit at work within them.

That's what he said in chapter 3, verse 24. Therefore, God's spirit is given to God's people so that they can be sure that they really do belong to God. And we saw something similar back in chapter 2, verse 27.

[14 : 23] The spirit opens eyes to see and believe the truth. Faithful gospel preaching is fueled by and produces fruit because God's spirit is at work.

But John's point is that not everything that goes by the name preaching is inspired by and illuminated through God's spirit. Much of it, actually, verse 3, originates from the Antichrist, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit of this world.

As James Philip often comments, all is not gold that glitters. Just because something says it's from the spirit, it doesn't mean it's from the spirit of God. And so John makes a very plain command.

Test what you are taught. There are other spirits. Because many false prophets have gone right into the world, you must test what you are taught. But what spirit is at play in the one teaching?

Is it the spirit of God? Or is it the spirit of the world? We need to grow in our ability to discern. Things can either be from God.

[15 : 41] A phrase used six times in these verses. From God, from God, from God. Or things can be from the world. That is the world that is in darkness under the rule and influence of Satan.

From God used six times in six verses. And the world also used six times in six verses. We must discern, is it from God or from the world?

And so John gives an obvious but perhaps overlooked command. Of course, Christians are believers. They believe the truth about Jesus. But there's a necessary negative that goes along with that.

Christians are also commanded, verse one, not to believe. Do you see that? Beloved, do not believe every spirit.

The spirit of the devil is at work in many and various ways. Miraculous ways even. And this means that we cannot be naive. We can't say yes to everything.

[16 : 49] Well, we do know the truth about Jesus. But we also like this other version of it over here. And we like a little bit of this spirituality too. A little bit of that Jesus over there. And that Buddhist idea is quite nice too.

And I really like this version of Jesus that means I don't need to change. Well, that church over there, that must be the real thing. Because did you see the miraculous signs?

John says, test the spirits. Don't assume anything that talks about Jesus or anything that claims to be from the spirit or anything that refers to God is going to be wholesome and true.

Don't make that assumption. In a world that is always teaching us through all kinds of media, we cannot be lazy listeners or observers. There is truth that is to be believed.

But nothing else is to be believed. Discernment is an important characteristic for the Christian. We mustn't be naively positive about anything that sounds vaguely Christian or be encouraging of any and all who would take to teaching the Bible.

[18 : 00] No, John's command is striking. Do not believe. And so test. Well, how do we test? What is the test that John talks about?

How do we know what not to believe? Well, he tells us. This is how you know which spirit is at work in a prophet or a preacher. What do they confess and believe and teach about Jesus?

Verse 2. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. What do they do with Jesus?

What does John mean by confessing that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? I think the key words for us here in verse 2 are that Christ has come.

Remember, Christ is Jesus' title, not his name. It is his title as the promised king who would rescue his people and establish his throne in his kingdom forever.

[19 : 06] However, Jesus, who is the Christ, has come in the flesh. So John's test is, when people came to speak about Jesus, is it the Jesus of history that they speak of?

Is it the Jesus who fulfilled all the expectations of the Old Testament prophecies? Is it the Jesus who is the forever king in David's line?

Who would rescue his people? That's the Jesus that John talks about. When John talks of Jesus coming or that he has come, that has a particular significance in John's gospel.

Listen to what John says in John chapter 1. He says, The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. Was coming into the world.

In John's gospel chapter 6, he says, When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.

[20 : 16] John 11, Martha says, Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

You see, there was an expectation built out of all that the prophets spoke of. Jesus wasn't a surprise. He wasn't a bolt from the blue.

The great news of John's gospel is that Jesus was the coming one. The coming one had come. The Jesus of history was the God-man, who was crucified and raised and ascended and who reigns.

He was the fulfillment of all that was spoken of in the Old Testament. Jesus was the true and better prophet, the true and better priest, the true and better king.

Jesus has a very real and rich identity. Those who confess this and teach and believe it, they are from God, says John.

[21 : 20] The departed have made claims about attaining and offering greater knowledge. John is reassuring his recipients all along that they knew Jesus. Back in 1 John 2.13, You do know Jesus.

He's reassuring them in 2.20 that they have all knowledge. But the departed seem to be claiming that they have more. They have the key to knowledge.

Come with us and you'll get more. But brothers and sisters, when anyone tells us that they have the key, the secret to knowing the things of the Spirit or knowing God, remember that Jesus is the true and greater prophet who was longed for and who has come.

Jesus is God's full and final revelation. Jesus is God's final word. We don't need more than him.

Any knowledge that takes us away from or beyond Jesus is false knowledge. The departed claim greater knowledge, but they also claim and offer greater purity.

[22 : 31] We saw that, their claim in chapter 1, verse 8. They are the ones without sin. But when someone downplays sin or redefines it or replaces it as the main problem humanity faces, offering salvation through something else like saving the planet or tending to the poor, remember, remember, Jesus is the true and greater priest whose chief work was to offer the sacrifice that deals with sin once and for all.

And he now sits down because his work is finished. There's a parted claim and offer greater victory. Back in chapter 2, verses 13 to 14, we see a couple of instances of the word overcoming.

They talk about some sort of overcoming in this age. But Jesus is the true and greater king whose victory is assured, but whose victory won't be fully seen until the end of the ages.

And the other big claim that we've seen the departed make, they claim and offer greater spirituality, greater anointing of some sort.

But the Spirit of God is only at work in those who cherish the real Jesus. And those who do cherish the real Jesus are anointed and indwelt by God's Spirit.

[23 : 58] There is none greater than Jesus who has all of these things for us. The test of any spirit, of any teacher, is what do they do with Jesus?

Is he enough? Is he exalted high over everything else? It might be a helpful thing to have in mind when trying to weigh these things up, trying to discern that Jesus is a prophet, priest, and king.

When trying to discern if people are taking him seriously, does the one teaching see Jesus as prophet, the chief and final revelation of God? Is Jesus the message? John Calvin says, the perfect doctrine that Jesus has brought has made an end to all of their prophecies.

No more prophecies or additional words are required. Is Jesus the prophet? Does the one teaching see Jesus as a priest?

Is his sin-bearing work prime in how they think and talk about him? Do they delight in him as the one who's the propitiation for our sin?

[25 : 16] And does the one teaching see Jesus as king? Is he king and lord? Is he the one to whom we submit? The one who rules over all of life? Or, verse 3, do they not confess this Jesus?

Do they not confess the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the scriptures? The confession in verse 3 is speaking about the same Jesus as verse 2. So we should read verse 3 as every spirit who doesn't confess Jesus, the Christ who has come in the flesh, is not from God.

Rejecting or ignoring or obscuring the Jesus who has come in flesh in history is not the work of God's spirit, but the work of Antichrist.

And not confessing him, as well as outright rejection, can be in at least three different ways. Not confessing him can be by saying that Jesus is too much.

We can take his miracles, they're wonderful, but not his morals. Or we can accept that he's a wise teacher, but he's not Lord.

[26 : 28] Or we like his love, but not his righteousness and his justice. And please stop bleating on about sin. Or he can not be confessed by saying that Jesus is not enough.

We need something else. Jesus plus our prescribed behaviors that become shibboleths. Jesus plus our particular baptism, our songbook or Bible translation, our dress code, our anointing, our practices.

Jesus plus something else. Or he can be not confessed by confessing a completely different Jesus.

A reimagined one. One detached from anything historical. The champion of whatever cause people want. His name taken and applied to whatever the beliefs of the day. Jesus, an idea that can be molded as we like rather than a man, a person who was promised, who appeared, who preached repentance.

And who died a substitutionary death. Not everything that calls itself a church is a church.

[27 : 46] Not everyone who ascends a pulpit, whether it be in a church or on YouTube, is an apostolic preacher. And so John says, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits.

Not everything that claims to be from the mouth of God is from the mouth of God. God's spirit will be invoked by people, by many, who aren't indwelt by him or eliminated by him.

But there is a real Jesus who is everything to his people. And John doesn't just brace us for bombardments with a test. He also offers us real encouragement, real encouragement, real encouragement to those who belong truly to the Lord God.

And so secondly, he says in verses 4 to 6, trust in God's triumph. Trust in God's triumph. The true truth will ultimately prevail because God's spirit is greater than the spirit who is in the world.

And the evidence of this is that there are any believers at all. Now perhaps you have some long-term and close friends who've begun to drift from the Bible and are much more influenced by contemporary society now and they're attempting to draw you in with them.

[29 : 16] And maybe you've also got a colleague at work who talks a lot about being a Christian but just doesn't really take what God has said seriously and they undermine your witness at work by speaking of what really is a different Jesus, one that's a bit more appealing to modern sensibilities.

And then you have others who you've been sharing your faith with over a long period of time and they come to you with a latest statement from the leader of another denomination who have claimed to receive a new message from the spirit to become more relevant today and are unhitching from the historic Christian faith.

And then you find yourself in a discussion with a very evil communicator who's quite sharp, well-read on the latest assault on Jesus and he's quoting all kinds of apparent evidence to you, twisting you in knots and you aren't really sure how to respond.

And from all sides you seem to be having your understanding of Jesus and your trust in him questioned and undermined. It can feel like a tidal wave is about to hit you or has hit you and it's going to pull you in the direction of everyone else.

And you're left thinking, what chance does the gospel have? Well, John has great words of assurance for us if that's the feeling you knew. And it's a reassurance that is at the very heart of this passage.

[30 : 39] There's a sandwich-type structure here from verses 2 to 6. Verse 2 and verse 6 deal mainly with those who are from God.

And then verses 3 and verse 5 deal mainly with those who are from the world. And so right in the middle of the double-layered sandwich, verse 4, John says, little children, you are from God and have overcome them.

When faced with the seemingly overwhelming nature of the many and the deception that is characteristic of this age, John says, verse 6, those who are with us, those who listen to us, the apostles, you're from God.

As long as you remain with the apostles and with the real Jesus that they speak of, then John says, you have overcome the world. You've overcome the false teachers.

You've overcome the Antichrist. What does overcome here mean? Well, I take it that it means not being sucked in by the false teaching but rather seeing through it.

[31 : 59] It means not being overcome by the spirit of the world, not falling for the delusion and deception, not being duped by promises and claims that say, come with us for greater and truer knowledge and salvation and purity and spirituality and all the rest, not being duped by less than Jesus or Jesus plus something or a different Jesus.

No, you have overcome because you cling tightly to the real Jesus, the Jesus that the apostles had seen, heard, and touched, the Jesus who is the propitiation of our sin for our sin.

Look back at chapter 2, verses 12 to 14, the hinge and the heart of this letter. John twice mentions overcoming.

Verse 13, I am writing to you because you have overcome the evil one. You have overcome the evil one. How? Because verse 12, your sins are forgiven.

And verse 13, because you know the real Jesus who has been since the beginning. Second overcoming, verse 14, you have overcome the evil one because the word of God abides in you and knowing Jesus has made you strong.

[33 : 33] The truth will ultimately prevail and we see it prevail in our midst, don't we? We had these videos over the Easter weekend of folks who have come to faith, lives being changed by Jesus.

it was the truth that brought them to Jesus. In a world that has a million messages all vying for attention and all claiming authority and truth, the gospel of a crucified king pulls people out of darkness and into light.

God's spirit is at work and he helps people to see through all that might deceive and to reach out and to cling on to Jesus, the Christ who has come in the flesh.

We can trust God to keep us in the truth because he has brought us to the truth. When faced with a deluge of arguments against and critiques of our faith and when faced with competing Christs, it would be easy for us to feel out of our depth.

But, verse 4, John says, he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. The wit of man and the wiliness of Satan are no match for the wisdom and wonder of God.

[35 : 01] we have overcome the false prophets because we know and love the real Jesus. Listen to James Philip on this.

He says, the answer, the answer, not only to the danger of false teaching and heresy, but to every temptation that could come against us, every weakness of which we might be aware, is that over against the worst that could be true of us by nature, there stands this mighty incontrovertible fact that we are indwelt by one who is greater than everything and everyone that can be against us.

the God who drew us to him will defend us. The God who pardons us will preserve and protect us.

And listen to Calvin. He says, we can no more be conquered than God himself who has armed us with his own power to the end of the world.

We can no more be conquered than God himself can be conquered. That is where our reassurance and confidence is. He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

[36 : 18] God himself is our confidence. He cannot be duped. His spirit cannot be foiled. At his choosing, he can turn a cold, hard heart of stone, blind to all spiritual realities and overcome by every deception, he can turn a cold, hard heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

He can cut through all darkness and deception with light and truth, bringing life to death. His gospel word has and will overcome Satan.

His gospel word has and will see us overcome Satan. That's what he's worked within us. That's what the spirit in 324 is a guarantee of.

And as sure as he has worked that within us, then so surely can we know that as long as we remain and abide and continue in the apostles' gospel, we will never be given to darkness and no amount of false prophets, no amount of false Christs will pull us away from him.

For the one who is in us is the same God who we read in the gospels, bound the strong man, overcoming him so that he could plunder his goods.

[37 : 42] That's what God has done to the evil one. And so even when false messages and false prophets prosper in this world, even when they are ever so popular, that shouldn't surprise us or cause us to be perturbed.

Because verse 5, they're from the world, therefore they speak to the world and the world listens to them. Of course it does, because they're speaking the same language, a language that originates from the spirit of Antichrist.

We mustn't look longingly at the messages and the versions of truth that draw a crowd. The world draws the world. Remember the Lord Jesus' own words as he spoke very plainly about the many.

He said, God enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few.

God's spirit speaks the truth that brings life. His isn't the voice of the many, but his is the voice that matters.

[38 : 59] John says, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they're from God. Look at verse 6. John puts it another way. How do we know the spirit of truth from the spirit of error?

It all comes down not to speaking, but to listening. John says, whoever listens to us, whoever listens to the apostles, are from God.

That's ultimately what counts. the apostolic gospel, the words of the ones who had seen and heard and touched the risen Lord Jesus, the words of the ones who saw, heard, and touched Jesus, the Christ who has come in the flesh.

Friends, we don't need any more than that. And if we have that, then John says to us, little children, you are from God and have overcome them.

For he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. Let's pray. Amen. Lord God, amidst the clamoring voices of our day, help us, we pray, to hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and grant us an ever-growing appreciation for the Christ who has come, that we might never be plucked from his grasp.

[40 : 42] And we ask for your help in these ways, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.